ED 155 940 THE SILENT WAY: A PERSONAL ACCOUNT. TEAL OCCASIONAL PAPERS, VOL. 1,
1977.
1 OF 1 NEHRING, MARY JANE BRITISH COLUMBIA ASSOCIATION OF TEACHERS OF
ENGLISH AS AN ADDITIONAL LANGUAGE, VANCOUVER. 77 11P.

# DOCUMENT RESUME

ED 155 940 FL 009 559

| | |
|---|---|
| AUTHOR | Nehring, Mary Jane |
| TITLE | The Silent Way: A Personal Account. TEAL Occasional Papers, Vol. 1, 1977. |
| INSTITUTION | British Columbia Association of Teachers of English as an Additional Language, Vancouver. |
| PUB DATE | 77 |
| NOTE | 11p. |
| AVAILABLE FROM | Maureen C. Sawkins, British Columbia Association of TEAL, c/o King Edward Campus, V.C.C., 2750 Oak St., Vancouver, British Columbia, Canada ($2.50 Canadian plus $.50 postage) |
| EDRS PRICE | MF-$0.83 HC-$1.67 Plus Postage. |
| DESCRIPTORS | Classroom Communication; *English (Second Language); Instructional Innovation; *Language Instruction; *Second Language Learning; Speech Communication; Student Participation; *Teaching Methods |
| IDENTIFIERS | *Silent Way |

ABSTRACT

An account is given of a teacher's experience with a new approach to language learning, the Silent Way. The teaching tools used in this method are few: colored rods, wall charts of words and signs in color, a pointer, the fingers of the teacher's left hand, and silence. Teaching is subordinated to learning, that is, teaching must not interfere with the student's learning. This teacher found that when she limited her speaking and interference, the students became more actively involved in the learning process and learned more rapidly. The experience was stimulating for both the teacher and the students. (CFM)

***********************************************************************
* Reproductions supplied by EDRS are the best that can be made *
* from the original document. *
***********************************************************************

"PERMISSION TO REPRODUCE THIS MATERIAL HAS BEEN GRANTED BY
Maureen C. Sawkins
TO THE EDUCATIONAL RESOURCES INFORMATION CENTER (ERIC) AND USERS OF THE ERIC SYSTEM."

U.S. DEPARTMENT OF HEALTH, EDUCATION & WELFARE
NATIONAL INSTITUTE OF EDUCATION
THIS DOCUMENT HAS BEEN REPRODUCED EXACTLY AS RECEIVED FROM THE PERSON OR ORGANIZATION ORIGINATING IT. POINTS OF VIEW OR OPINIONS STATED DO NOT NECESSARILY REPRESENT OFFICIAL NATIONAL INSTITUTE OF EDUCATION POSITION OR POLICY

ED155940

FL009559

# THE SILENT WAY: A PERSONAL ACCOUNT

Mary Jane Nehring

In the school where I work, some of us have collectively developed a comprehensive resource file of teaching materials which now fills an entire room. We have a folder for almost every trouble spot experienced by people learning English: from article exercises for Asians and word order exercises for Greeks to vocabulary building and reading exercises for everyone. For two years this resource room had been a boon to my own teaching, ultimately making possible a comfortable routine of spotting student "problems" and almost instantly finding a ready-made "solution" in the files to meet each problem. The resource room was not unlike a giant walk-in recipe box for me. I began to rely on it to the point that I would have been hard put to prepare for my classes without it. But even with a handy collection of recipes at my fingertips, I cannot say that I knew what I was "cooking"--after months of following my recipes, many students seemed to show next to no progress in their mastery of English. Every end-of-term assessment was a discouraging affair for all despite prodigious amounts of energy expended in preparation for it.

Then in the late spring of this year, I began to investigate another approach to language learning known as the Silent Way. At the beginning, since I had no access to a resource room, I felt a real lack of direction. My new larder of teaching tools seemed so bare: some coloured rods, some wall charts of words and signs in colour, a pointer, the fingers of my left hand, and my own silence. A silence which, in my fear of the unknown, seemed to be synonymous with a vast uncomfortable void, to be filled only with shuffling feet and general squirming. Beyond these things, all I had to work with were my own resources and the resources of my students.

Of my own resources, I felt that I had some evidence. After less than four hours of Silent Way instruction in Mandarin, I had been able to count to 64 billion in a language theretofore totally alien to me. I could produce the sounds of counting in Mandarin with an ease that I had not experienced with the European languages I had attempted to learn, but could never master beyond a string of basic vocabulary with precious little structure or melody to hold it all together. The challenge of fluency in a foreign language had always presented me with a seemingly insurmountable identity crisis in which I would attempt but brief forays into the new language, only to retreat quickly into the security of my English-speaking personality. So my 64 billion in Mandarin was an unabashed thrill. This was accompanied by a then vague, now certain, conviction stirring within me, telling of a resource that made it possible for me to change myself. In terms of my work, "change" meant to try out ways of teaching that were new to me.

Of the resources of the students I would have, I felt I knew nothing. I had never taught a class at a rank beginners level before and did not know what the students could do. But if I could count to 64 billion after my first lesson in Mandarin, maybe they could do the same in English.

I must report that in the first lesson we did not reach the billion mark in English. The lesson for me was that in learning, each situation is unique and I should not expect to be able to duplicate past experiences. What happened in the first class was exciting in its own way. I had not uttered one word, but the students were saying, breathing exactly where a native speaker would breathe, "Give me twenty seven million, three hundred forty six thousand, eight hundred and thirty three dollars and ninety nine cents."

A month later during an exercise in which these "Beginners I" students were writing their own questions about a picture, the following were produced: "Where is the other shoe?" "I'm not sure where is the other shoe but maybe it is under the bed." "Why is the girl sitting on the floor?" "I don't know, but I think she is sitting on the floor because she drinking too much whiskey and now she is very tired." (When asked to reconsider this last offering, the student supplied the missing "was" on his own.) Evidence like this of the inventive powers of students tended to overwhelm me at the time. I certainly had not "taught"--nor had any intention of teaching--compound-complex sentences to students with four weeks of English, yet Bill Chow and Dominique L'Herbier were creating them on their own. Many of my notions about the vagaries of the English language and how it should be taught were being shattered. Perhaps there was something more fundamental than teaching grammar "content," something that had to do with the uses students make of themselves and their mental powers.

Not all students advanced so fast and so far into English during that first class. At the other end of the spectrum from Bill and Dominique was Mercedes, who, after two months of being in my class, could not utter one simple statement in English that was coherent. While I gave the credit to Bill and Dominique themselves for what they had learned, I gave myself the blame for Mercedes' not having learned and had to ask myself why. Answering that question showed me that I had as much, if not more, to learn from the slow students as from the fast ones. My way of relating to Mercedes in class had been to ignore her because she would slow the lesson down for everyone else or to ask her to do only the easiest of tasks. For any statement whatsoever she had relied on a Spanish-speaking friend, who, by the way, generally gave her the answer in a condescending fashion. When that student left to go to a higher level and I changed my way of relating to her, Mercedes had no one to rely on but herself. How rewarding it was to watch her discover that she--the only student "kept back"--also had the resources for making the connections necessary for one to speak English. The second time around, I accepted responsibility for teaching her as well as the others and she accepted responsibility for learning, often showing an initiative that can only be described as daring when compared to her first responses. What she accomplished was all hers, although the joy of her accomplishment was shared by both of us.

What was and continues to be mine, as a teacher now learning to teach, is a new awareness that I cannot take the student's place when it comes to his learning. Any learning that takes place comes about through his own work and attention. My task is to create situations in which the students are free from whatever blocks them to make the necessary effort involved in learning, situations in which my teaching is subordinated to their learning.

What changes, what becomes different in the everyday classroom, when one actively tries to subordinate teaching to learning? Over and beyond any different and novel "teaching techniques" are the basic uses one makes of oneself. At any given moment in the classroom we can ask ourselves a simple, yet subtle, question that can sharpen our awareness of the efficiency of our actions: "Does My activity at this moment help or interfere with the students' learning?" The first time this question was put to me, I could only gape at the questioner in disbelief. Surely I, with all the best intentions and preparation in the world, would not do anything so negative that I actually interfered with learning! How could I call myself a teacher if I ever, even unconsciously, prevented students from learning?

The question pricked both my consciousness and my conscience. I began to make it specific. Could I be interfering with learning when I provide the words to a student who is struggling to say something? Could I be interfering when a student makes a mistake and I correct it for him? When I give a test on the first day of class as a means of finding out what the students know and do not know? When I give a verbal explanation about a grammar point or a new vocabulary item? When I present a lesson replete with so much new vocabulary that most of the students' energy is directed to trying simply to maintain a grasp of meaning? When I draw the students' attention to the fancy materials I have prepared, forcing them to use my materials rather than their own linguistic powers? When I lead a drill in which I constantly repeat a model for the class?

Could I be interfering when I tell a favourite joke? When I accept with a patronizing smile a statement that nobody in the English-speaking world could understand? When I scrupulously avoid any gaps of silence in the class out of the belief that the class must not be allowed to lull, but must always be kept moving along at a lively pace? When I pass by the students who seem to be too shy or too "slow" to speak? Even when I give my "very good, Mr. Wong" stamp of approval to a piece of work well done? It made me nervous to realize that any one of these questions might possibly be answered in the affirmative.

If many of the things I had been doing routinely, without questioning, in class could be interfering with learning, what on earth were my alternatives? Would they be worth the potential trauma involved in giving up an old set of comfortable teaching habits? Mainly because just the thought of those old habits was beginning to make me uncomfortable, I stopped talking in class and thus began to discover the alternatives firsthand and study them. Relieved of the luxury--or burden, depending on your viewpoint--of speech, I was free to experiment with new uses of myself and free to observe the students in ways that I had never before seen them since they were freed in turn by my not speaking, to reveal something of themselves. After only a few sessions, I felt closer to my Silent Way beginner students than I had after weeks of association with my former advanced students; though I knew nothing of their personal histories, I had direct knowledge of them as persons, of their strengths and weaknesses, of their individual ways of learning. I experienced that alternative ways of handling myself and activities in the classroom were not as excruciating as I had feared. Often they became exhilarating.

It was by coming in contact with each classroom situation as it happened that alternatives began to reveal themselves and make sense to me as realistic ways of working. Answers to my questions regarding my actions became clearer when student feedback was immediate and right before my eyes. Instead of providing words to a struggling student, I saw that I could give him the time he needed to come up with what he wanted to say. Instead of correcting a student myself, I could have him rely on his own resources for the correction. If this did not work, perhaps he could learn from another member of the class working on the same problem.

Instead of beginning a course with a written test, I could present oral challenges that revealed in a short time what the students could do, without their having felt the failure of imperfect test performance. Instead of verbal explanations, I could create unambiguous visual situations clear to all with no need for a student to translate from his native language for understanding. Instead of hitting the student with what he did not know in terms of vocabulary, I could purposely restrict his field of working, giving him a chance to manipulate the language right from the start rathet than attempt to memorize it. Certainly the ability to manipulate the language would maximize his chances for "survival" in it far more than a battery of set situational dialogues. Instead of expending great amounts of my energy working on the language (e.g., developing ingenious drills and written exercises), I could use my energy to work on the students and their awareness while they worked on the language. Instead of mindless automaton drilling, I could engage the class in thoughtful structure practice, even encouraging new "models" to come from the class itself.

Instead of cracking jokes myself, I could engage the class in activities and games that invariably engendered spontaneous humour from the students themselves. Amazingly to me, even beginners came up with puns and language jokes of their own making in the moment of learning--to the delight of all. Instead of accepting unintelligible statements, I could show the student at precisely what point of pronunciation or structure his statement broke down so that he could learn how to make the transformation into intelligibility. Or, I could open up the role of acceptance or rejection of a statement to the class as a whole. Instead of avoiding periods of silence, I could learn to use them as "thinking" times during which the students are challenged to reassess a linguistic situation. Instead of "kindly" passing the shy or "slow" students by (and thereby copping out on my own responsibility), I could give them the opportunity to take the responsibility to say what they are able, thus building their confidence while providing time for the other students to solidify their own knowledge. Surprises were in store for me when I began to practice this in the classroom--often a "slow" student would be the only one of the class who could come out with the key to a puzzle that everyone was concentrating on unraveling. Instead of continual back-patting, I could refrain from teaching the student to rely on the teacher's approval of his work for satisfaction, freeing him to know by his own inner criteria of rightness that he knows what he is doing and freeing him to approve of himself when he has done well.

The more I study these alternatives and continually discover new ones to fit new situations, the more I am impressed with the fact that the silent approach to language learning has one of its sources in something that is rarely examined--let alone taken seriously--in academic circles. That source is common sense. It is simply common sense for a teacher to work directly with what every learner has: perception, analytical powers, imagination, and a natural inclination to become absorbed in puzzles and games. Before I began using this approach in my classes, I was told, "It will never work with the Chinese." People from more "traditional" cultures may enter a classroom with certain expectations, expectations that do not include a teacher who does not talk. But when these people ask the inevitable "Why don't you speak?" and I in turn ask them whether they use their ears or their mouths to speak, they pause to reflect on the matter from a practical point of view and then usually show a ready willingness to give the new ways of working a try. Their own common sense quickly overrides their expectations and cultural conditioning, especially as they find themselves speaking with surety and ease.

Observers of Silent Way classes often comment on the level of involvement on the part of the students, expressing surprise that adults could be so intent on making seemingly trivial statements about seemingly trivial objects (coloured wooden sticks) and actions. The learners are involved because they are busy actively applying their whole selves to a challenge, calling on many powers simultaneously. The resources they bring to the task are possessed by all, even by their teacher. Because _my_ imagination, _my_ sense of experimentation and _my_ tools of analysis are just as stimulated as those of the learners, no lesson has to be a rehashing of old recipes. Each is a new experiencing of inner resources while learning how to teach. My common sense tells me that if this joyful everyday experiencing is possible for me, then it is possible for every teacher.

---

SELECTED BIBLIOGRAPHY

Gattegno, Caleb. _On Being Freer_. New York: Educational Solutions, 1975.

______________. _Teaching Foregn Languages in Schools the Silent Way_. New York: Educational Solutions, 1972.

__________. Teaching Reading with Words in Color. New York: Educational Solutions, 1967.

__________. Towards a Visual Culture: Educating Through Television. New York: Avon Books, 1969.

__________. The Universe of Babies. New York: Educational Solutions, 1973.

__________. What We Owe Children: The Subordination of Teaching to Learning. New York: Avon Books, 1970.

__________. The Common Sense of Teaching Foreign Languages. New York: Education al Solutions, 1976.